A Madonna Who Shows the Beauty in Going Overboard

By **Jason Farago** | Aug. 13, 2021

What makes a picture "good"? (01)

There's a certain kind of skeptic who'll tell you that culture used to be so much more balanced. The old masters believed in accuracy, harmony; then, in the 20th century, it all went wrong. In the old days they had standards! (01)

But the past is weirder than that. And long before the modern era, artists were rebelling against the assumption that a "good" painting had to look convincingly real. (02)

This is one of my favorite Italian paintings: an altarpiece by Parmigianino[1], among the greatest and strangest painters to emerge in the first half of the 16th century. (02)

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[1] Francesco Mazzola, known as Parmigianino (Parma 1503 – Casalmaggiore 1540). Francesco Mazzola, also called Parmigianino, after Parma, his birth town, was an artist whose talent came to the fore from a very early age. He trained in direct contact with Correggio who, at the time, was painting the large cycles of frescoes in the churches of Parma. After completing his first commissions in Parma, Parmigianino finished his training in Rome, where he studied the works of Michelangelo and Raphael. His intellectual, eccentric temperament drove him to develop an elegant, sophisticated, anti-classic style that made him the leading figure of Emilian Mannerism.

He was commissioned to paint the *Madonna with the long neck* in 1534 by Elena Baiardi Tagliaferri for the church of Santa Maria dei Servi in Parma. In the commissioning contract, the

His "Madonna of the Long Neck," as it's now known, pictures the mother of Christ stretched out like bubblegum. Her dainty head seems to be plopped on an oversized curving body. (03)

It's Parmigianino's last major painting, left unfinished at his death in 1540. Now it hangs in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, as the archetype of the exaggerated elegance that Italians called "maniera" — or just "style." (03)

Everything is calculated. Refined. Stylized — to a degree that makes some people sick. The art historian Alois Riegl called Mannerism one of the "emptiest

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artist undertook to finish the painting in five months, but when he died in 1540, the altarpiece was in his study, still unfinished. Two years later, a decision was made to place it on the altar for which it had been destined, and the following inscription was added to the base of the column to justify its incomplete state: "Adverse destiny prevented Francesco Mazzola from Parma from completing this work".

A Virgin with a statuesque figure reminiscent of Michelangelo, but with unnaturally elongated forms, contemplates the Divine Infant, who is asleep on her lap. The Child's slumber prefigures his death on the cross, as the image of the Crucifixion is reflected in the urn that the angel is showing to the Virgin. The column on Mary's left highlights the suppleness of her bust and neck, but it could also be a reference to the incorruptible purity of the Virgin sung about in the Marian hymn *Collum tuum ut columna*: "Your neck is like a column".

The small figure at the bottom on the right is St Jerome, who is unrolling his scroll as he turns towards an unfinished figure, St Francis (the artist only had time to paint one of his feet). The presence of St Francis could be a reference to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, the cult of which was diffused by the Franciscan order.

Although depicting a sacred theme, the artist does not forgo the typical sensuality of his artistic production: the figures with elongated limbs and refined poses, interpreted with sophisticated elegance, are permeated by a subtle eroticism, perceivable in the drapery clinging to the Virgin's body, highlighting her curves, in the slender hand lifted to the breast, in the litheness of the naked leg of the young angel in the foreground.

Joining the Medici collections in 1698, the painting is part of an altarpiece that the Grand Prince Ferdinando had purchased to increase his collection of masterpieces from the Renaissance to the early 17th century. His letters convey his enthusiasm about owning the work, which he describes as "drawn as if by Raphael, finished with the soul but without pain and marvellously coloured". (https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/parmigianino-madonna-long-neck)

and most superficial concepts of art." Susan Sontag said art like this could "never be of the greatest kind." (04)

You, too, may find this painting weird and contrived. If so, you are not wrong! But let me try to show you another way to look at contrivance. To show you the value, and even the beauty, that can come from going overboard. (05)

Mary appears young and content, eyes cast down at her newborn son. Her hair is curled a little too perfectly, and she has a diadem[2] of pearls crossing her middle part. (06)

Her face, though, is solid, hard, without the radiance of earlier Renaissance Madonnas. Her skin is so smooth it looks like enamelware. (07)

Just as solid is her dress, which is an uncommon off-white. Its folds are gathered together like shelves of ice. (08)

The Christ child balances in her lap, though that's a bit of a miracle. It seems pretty obvious, given his weight and position, that this uncommonly large Son of God ought to tumble to the floor. (09)

I've puzzled, in person, over his drooping left arm, which Parmigianino depicts in extreme foreshortening. It dangles as if broken — as if loosed from his shoulder. (10)

Jesus is asleep. Yet, through both size and pose, Parmigianino has made him look like he's already dead. This is a Madonna and Child with undertones of a Pietà[3]. (11)

Mary is attended by a phalanx[4] of angels, bunched together tightly on the left. Like her they have porcelain skin and golden curls. (12)

I think there are five of them … (13)

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[2] diadem: noun: a jeweled crown or headband worn as a symbol of sovereignty

[3] Pietà: noun: a picture or sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Jesus Christ on her lap or in her arms.

[4] phalanx: noun: a group of people or things of a similar type forming a compact body

… or maybe six? There's also this little guy, hiding beneath Mary's raised arm. Perhaps he's just in shadow, or was still waiting for his finishing touches. (14)

Also attending Mary is this pocket-size figure. To judge by his scroll, his hermit's robe and his emaciated body, he's very probably St. Jerome — though he looks more like a statue than a man. (15)

(There was also supposed to be a second saint, St. Francis. But the artist never got around to painting him beyond the foot.) (16)

The columns receding into the distance behind him prove that Parmigianino knew how to scale figures to simulate depth. It would have taken no extra effort to move up Jerome, so he would look plausibly far away. (17)

Instead, he's in essentially the same plane as Mary. He doesn't even come up to her knee. (18)

Sorry to be sacrilegious, but what the hell is going on? These bizarre shifts in scale, these unnatural elongations: Has this guy forgotten how to paint? (19)

Or is there another logic to these misscaled figures? What if all this imbalance and asymmetry adds up to something greater than harmony? (20)

Before the Renaissance, Europeans did not think that a work of religious art had to be lifelike for it to be accomplished, or holy. (21)

The figures in medieval religious art — like this Madonna from the Book of Kells — were flat, stylized representations. (22)

Icons, to use the word we've absorbed from this time. (23)

They repeated a collection of symbolic conventions and standardized facial expressions … (24)

… lest the pictures look too much like the pagan imagery of Greece and Rome. (25)

Then, around 1300, in Florence and Siena, those flat figures start to take on volume. (26)

Painters like Giotto start to imbue facial expressions with a greater humanity. And, most important, they start to arrange pictorial space with new optical techniques that produce an illusion of depth. (27) (28)

It's as if, in the art historian Ernst Gombrich's phrase, "the sacred story were happening before our very eyes." (29)

Italian painters, over the 14th and 15th centuries, become masters of illusionism and naturalistic depictions in space. (30)

The flat plane of the picture stands in for the real world. The divine becomes tangible. (31)

The artists apply new understandings of optics. (32)

Also new studies of anatomy … (33)

… as well as oil paint, a Flemish innovation brought to Italy. Its slow drying times help them paint pictures with an even greater semblance of life. (34)

With oils, Raphael and his rivals produce religious paintings imbued with newly palpable emotions. (35)

The sacred story takes on a passionate immediacy, conveyed through human gestures, human expressions. (36)

Parmigianino and his generation will be the heirs to this achievement: the achievement of the High Renaissance. (37)

They're the pupils and apprentices of the artists who brought naturalistic representation to its apex. (38)

For two centuries, Italian artists were perfecting the optical and mathematical principles that could make flat panels appear to be open windows. By Parmigianino's day, they'd done it. (39)
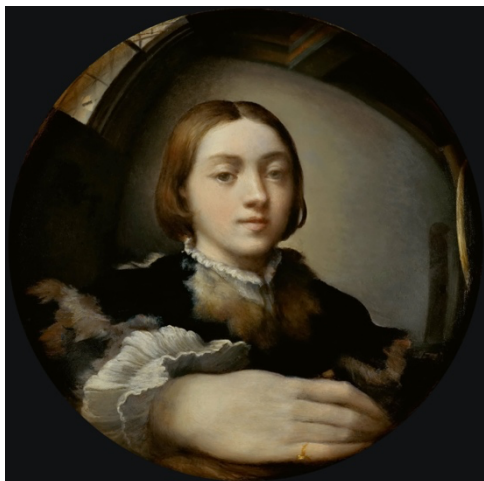
So what's a young artist to do? (40)
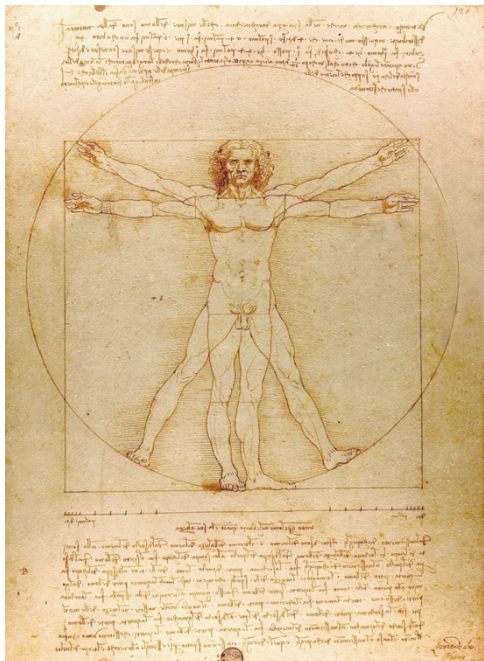
For the artists of the High Renaissance, there'd been a certainty that the greatest human creations had the spark of the divine. (41)

That what was good was harmonious, and what was harmonious was good. (42)

But by the 1520s, when Parmigianino painted this wonderfully distorted self-portrait, you see artists deploying those same humanistic discoveries and optical innovations in much quirkier ways. (43)

Precedents start to get warped. Rationality gets applied to irrational ends. (44)

It was as if, for Parmigianino's generation, life had to be explicitly aestheticized for it to be interesting. The accuracy and symmetry of their predecessors came to seem … (45)

… well, not enough. (46)

Look closely at the fingers of Mary's right hand. (47)

They're spindly, spidery, to an almost macabre extreme. But not because Parmigianino didn't know how to depict anatomy the "right" way. (47a)

The long fingers are stretched out, instead, to accentuate the spectacle of her gesture. (48)

Another of Parmigianino's show-off moves is Mary's flexed right foot, which seems to protrude from the picture plane. (49)

Not easy to do this! And yet: Why would he bother? (50)

And why the long neck? Why this swanlike connector between the Madonna's statuesque body and dainty little head? (51)

Well: Look how the neck echoes and contrasts the column at right. We have two white cylinders. One solid, one flexible. One freestanding, one fastened. (52)

In explicit contrast to the column, the Madonna is snaking up the canvas, from bottom to top. Her throat is more than an extrusion; it's a hairpin turn. (53)

And check out how she fills the entire picture plane, top to bottom. That's unusual for an altarpiece. (54)

If this is definitely a religious artwork, it also goes out of its way to present the Mother of God as the sum of shapes, colors, curves. (54a)

The long neck and the curving body are affectations, yes. But they're affectations with an aim: to make refinement itself into the painting's purpose and achievement. (54b)

That S-curve is known in Italian as the "figura serpentinata," and it was the hallmark of Mannerist painting. (55 Vison of St. Jerome 1526-1527)

A few years previously, Parmigianino used the same S-curve in another Madonna and Child painting: for John the Baptist, torquing like a Hellenistic statue. (56)

It was, by design, a difficult shape to paint proficiently. You lose the balance and symmetry of Renaissance anatomy. Now, the limbs twirl away from trunks, contorting, spiraling. (*57*)

John Ashbery, in a long poem about Parmigianino, saw in the artist's flourishes a "pure affirmation that doesn't affirm anything." (58 Madonna of the Rose)

Or, put another way: They were meant to be seen as stylistic efforts above all.
(59_ibid_closeup_hands)
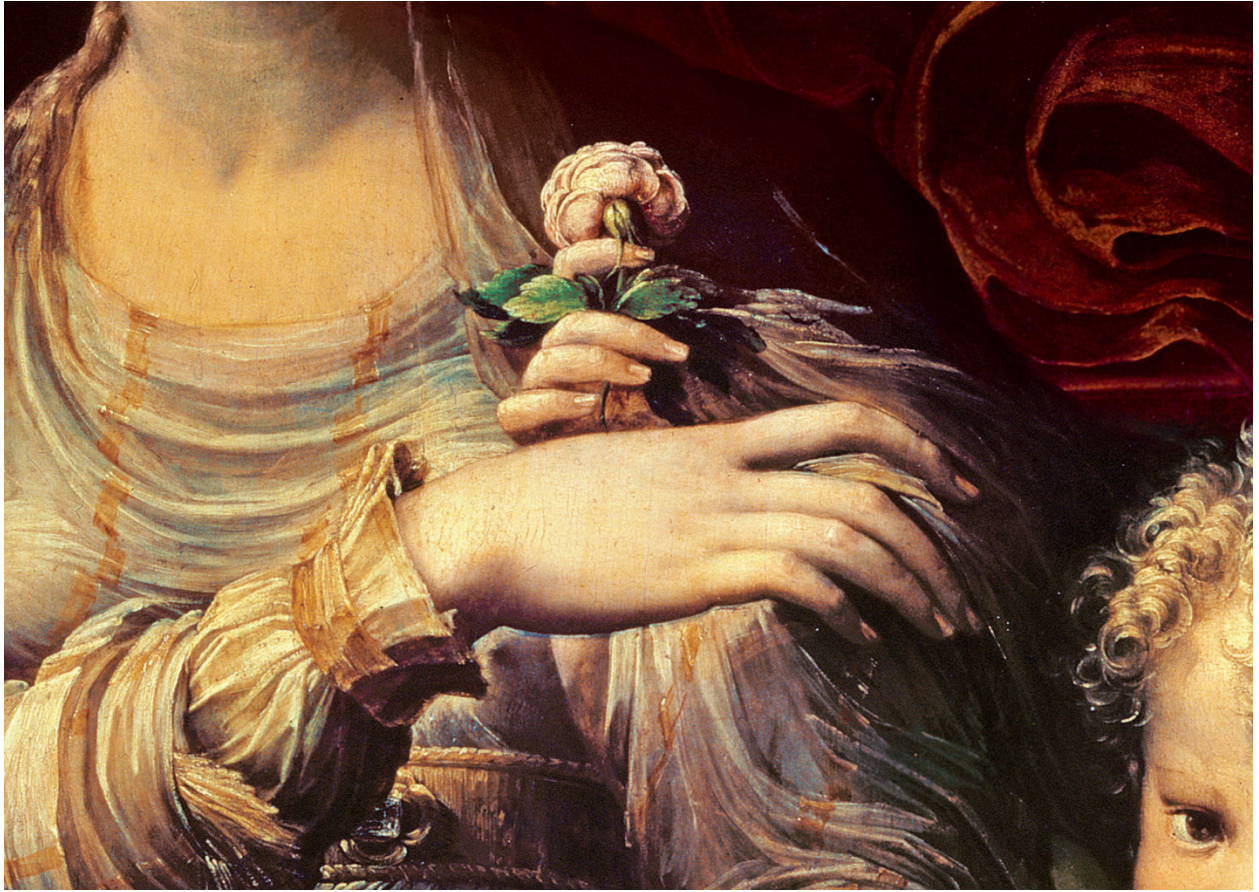
These seductive S-curves became an international sensation in the 16th century. They appealed to the tastes of learned aristocrats, in Florence, in Prague, in Antwerp, in Fontainebleau.
(60_bartholomeus_spranger_1569_jupiter_and_antiope_seductive_S-curves)

The artists placed figures in wacky poses, which they then tried to render with a breezy nonchalance: the mark of courtly sophistication. (61_ibid_closeup)

The curves could be graceful. The curves could be frisky.
(62_francesco_salviati_charity_1554-1558_graceful_frisky_S_curves)

But what's important is that they were self-conscious. They were knowing.
(63_ibid_closeup_knowing_S_curves)

Highly polished and refined, these curvy bodies were intellectual games or erotic enticements, created by artists who could hold their own with royals and scholars. (64_Bronzino_circa_1545_An_Allegory_with Venus_and_Cupid_S_curves_for_royals_and_scholars)

Who needed to recreate life? Virtuosity and suavity were what mattered, as expressed by an individual artist in his individual style. (65_ibid_closeup_virtuosity_suavity)

The window on the world was turning opaque. The picture was becoming its own reason for being. (66_ibid_picture_becoming_its_own_reason_for_being)

"Everything is surface," as Ashbery has it. (67_ibid_everything_is_surface)

So when Parmigianino stretches the Madonna's neck, he's not avoiding, or failing at, the "harder" work of painting an anatomically credible body. (68_parmigianino_madonna_with_long_neck_and_st_jerome_1535-1540)

The opposite: He's purposely making things difficult for himself. He's putting aside imitation — by taking Greek and Roman traditions, as well as more recent Renaissance examples, and pushing them to extremes.
(69_ibid_foot_column_st_jerome)
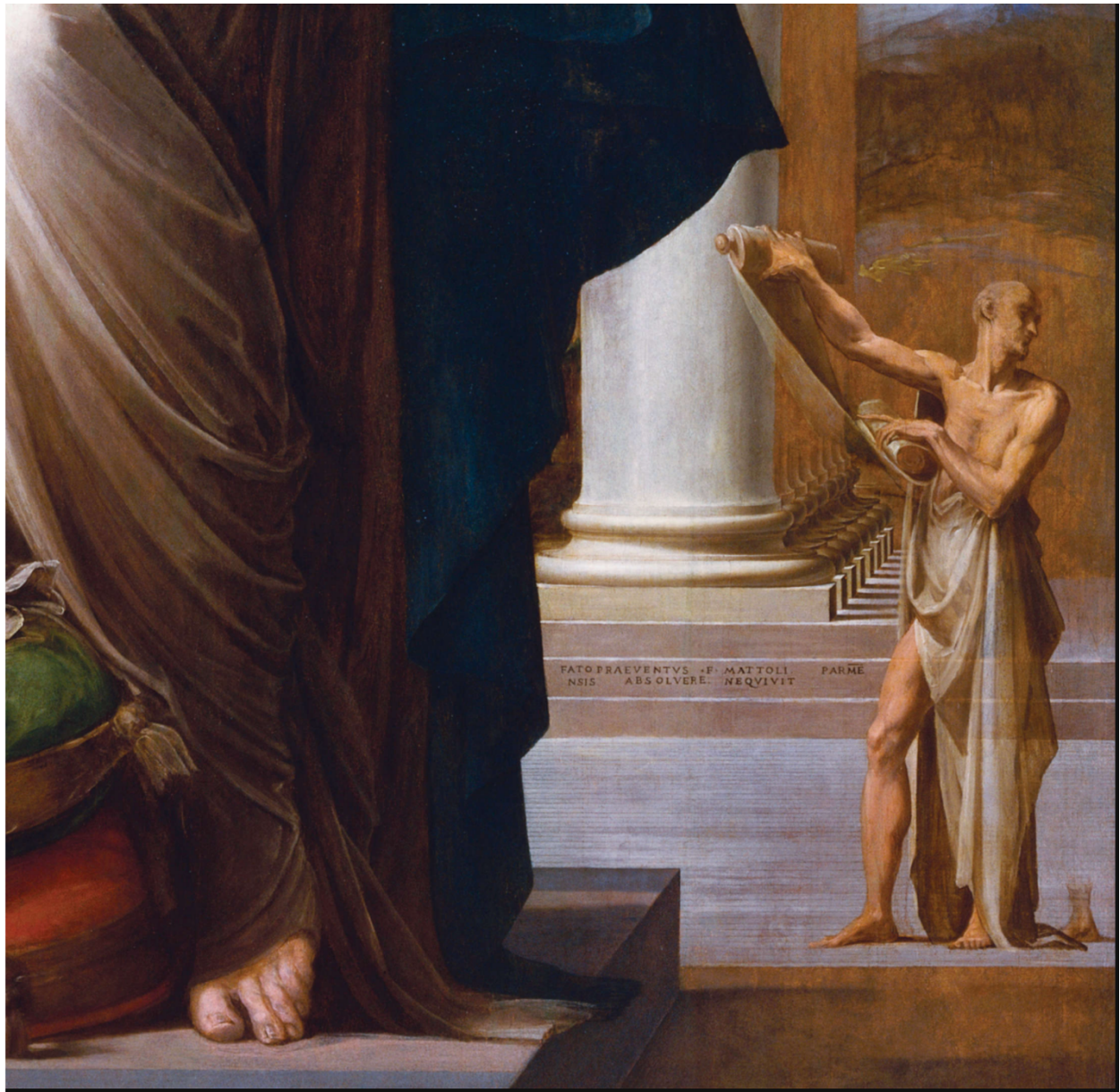
The gracefulness, the artifice — or, let's say it, the pretension — demonstrated his cultivation. (70_ibid_neck_column)

But not only that. They were a visual proposition that art needed to be more than a convincing illusion. That's what made the elongations and the curves more than just a game of can-you-top-that. (71_ibid_tumbling_infant_S_curves)

Mannerism is the first style that knows itself — a style about style. And that self-awareness made it newly possible to appreciate a work of art for reasons beyond visual credibility. (72_ibid_mannerism_first_style_that_knows_itself)

Surprise. Felicity. Invention. Shock. Modern viewers may find this familiar: The new test of a painting's success would be what it does to our expectations, how cleverly it builds on what came before. Its meaning would lie in its manner. (73_ibid_surprise_felicity_invention_shock)

This showiness would come to an end. At the turn of the 17th century, with Caravaggio especially, Italian painting takes on a fiery immediacy and dramatic naturalism. (74_caravaggio_the_alterpiece_at_the_Cavalletti_Chapel_Madonna _of_the_Pilgrims_1603_1605_also_madonna_of_loreto)

Instead of elegance, we get down in the dirt. Madonna and the saints look more human than ever. (75_ibid_closeup_madonna_and_child)

And for a long time — maybe still, you tell me — people have felt that Baroque paintings like this one … (76_ibid_closeup_pilgrims)
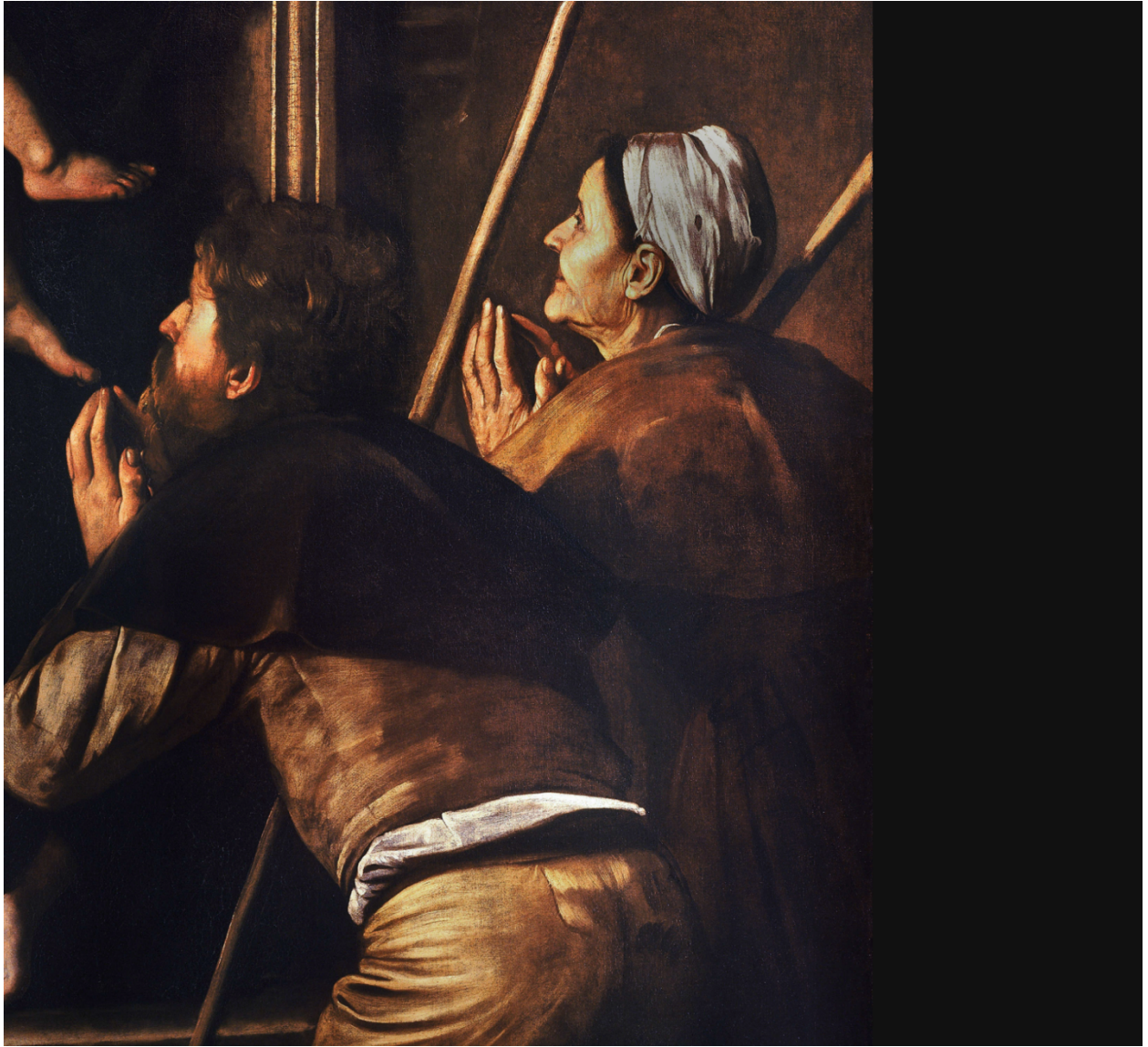
… have the breath of life that Parmigianino's lacks. That Mannerism was a sterile, superficial offroad. Unfortunate. Even degenerate. (*77_caravaggio_the_alterpiece_at_the_Cavalletti_Chapel_Madonna_of_the_Pilg rims_1603_1605*)

Not me. I find a great emotional impact in this alleged sterility.
(78_parmigianino_madonna_with_long_neck_and_st_jerome_1535-1540)

If you wanted one word to describe the "Madonna of the Long Neck," here's a contemporary one: This painting is *extra*. Yet Parmigianino shows what new vistas emerge when you intentionally go over the top.
(79_parmigianino_madonna_with_long_neck_and_st_jerome_1535-1540)

Look at Mary's blue mantle: this billowing drape, thrust out behind her like a parachute. (80_ibid_blue_mantle_like_a_parachute)

The way the mantle rustles, you'd think she's seated. Her foot resting on the cushions, and the raised knees on which Jesus nestles, suggest the same thing. (81_ibid_illusion_of_being_seated)

But there's no chair here. No throne, no stability. This sculptural Madonna isn't even obeying the laws of gravity. (81a_ibid_illusion_of_being_seated)

She's seated, but she's standing. She's fixed, but she's floating. What keeps her upright is painterly style — an agreement between us and Parmigianino that manner matters. (82_parmigianino_madonna_with_long_neck_and_st_jerome_1535-1540)

"Authentic" characters, "convincing" stories: Our hunger for realism has not gone away. But art's true vitality lies past simulation. It lies in a vision that connects us to someone else, even someone long dead.
(82a_parmigianino_madonna_with_long_neck_and_st_jerome_1535-1540)

And sometimes, to convey that vision, an artist has to be a little extra. When everyone else plays it safe, sometimes you have to stick your neck out. (82b_parmigianino_madonna_with_long_neck_and_st_jerome_1535-1540)

Produced by Joshua Barone, Alicia DeSantis, Nick Donofrio, Gabriel Gianordoli, Tala Safie, Josephine Sedgwick and Jessie Wender. (83_ibid_closeup_foot_st_jerome)

Images: Parmigianino, "Madonna of the Long Neck" (1534-1540)/Summerfield Press and Corbis, via Getty Images;

Virgin and Child Enthroned, from the Book of Kells (circa 800)/Trinity College Library Dublin and Bridgeman Images;

Giotto, Ognissanti Maestà (1300-1305)/Antonio Quattrone and Mondadori Portfolio, via Getty Images;

Botticelli, Madonna and Child (circa 1466-1467)/Fine Art Images and Heritage Images, via Getty Images;

Raphael, Madonna del Granduca (circa 1505)/Fine Art Images and Heritage Images, via Getty Images;

Raphael, the Sistine Madonna (1512/13)/bpk Bildagentur and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, via Art Resource, NY;

Leonardo da Vinci, The Proportions of the Human Figure (After Vitruvius), (circa 1492)/Bridgeman Images;

Parmigianino, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (1523/1524)/Ali Meyer and Bridgeman Images;

Parmigianino, Madonna and Child With Saints (1527)/Fine Art Images and Heritage Images, via Getty Images;

Parmigianino, Madonna of the Rose, (1529-30)/Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden and Bridgeman Images;

Bartholomeus Spranger, Jupiter and Antiope (circa 1596)/KHM-Museumsverband; Francesco Salviati, Charity (1543-1545)/Antonio Quattrone and Mondadori Portfolio, via Getty Images;

Bronzino, An Allegory With Venus and Cupid (circa 1540-1550)/National Gallery, London, via Art Resource, NY;

Caravaggio, Madonna di Loreto (1604).